

World Civil War Portraits

Solo show by Sara Shamma

London - The Old Truman Brewery - May 2015

Artist statement

Because of the war, after a long period of terror, I left my native Syria. I went to Lebanon with my two very young children and we settled in my mother's hometown while my husband still goes back and forth to Syria for business.

Being half Lebanese I was luckier than other Syrians escaping the war. I found myself in a haven of nature and friendly relatives, in a charming town in a generous and tolerant country.

But the war that I left didn't leave me, Syria is still burning and Lebanon is no longer safe. Extremist groups occupy the mountains and take prisoners from the Lebanese army, they are expected to come down to the cities and towns any time now...

Where to go now?

The fanatic war that spread from Damascus is spreading everywhere... Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Lebanon... even Paris and Copenhagen, and tomorrow maybe London.

The world is not safe anymore.

The state of the war makes people's lives very different, different to the lives of others who are not living the war, different to life before the war; this person looks at people in a new way, sees part of their lives that was hidden or invisible, and is inspired. The value of the human being becomes suddenly central.

In Lebanon I started looking at people in a new way, seeing them through new eyes. Many people inspired me, they inspired me a lot. I used to think before that I was interested in life, death and dissolution, but now I am interested in these topics a hundred times more. Some of the people in this town occupy these paintings: their eyes, their lives, their hopes and desires, and the way I felt about them.

In this small Lebanese town I found out that there was a female butcher who slaughters the animals herself. I went to visit her and was surprised that she turned out to be a very tiny sweet lady. I agreed that I would come to her place one early morning to witness her act. When I went at six o'clock on a rainy morning, she was about to kill a calf ... the experience was tremendous, the little woman controlled the huge tied animal and took his life, the blood liquefied in the rain and formed streams, the organs separated from each other by the small strong hands of the goddess.

Everything, every organ, every colour and every scent took me back to Syria ... this feeling has materialized in some of the paintings.

These paintings are from a civil war that started in Syria four years ago. The civil war which has destroyed 90% of my country, displaced over 9 million people, and taken the life of over 200 thousands human beings, continues today.

I believe that the civil war began in Syria many years ago, centuries ago; we have been always in a war against each other. A war among generations, a war between men and women, a war among religions and sects, among ethnicities and traditions, among beliefs, a war between cities and rural areas...

One of the main reasons for this old war, in my opinion, is that every one of us sees the differences between ourselves before the things in common.

Can't we consider the differences, any differences, as colours that make things nicer? Why does difference threaten some people? Can't they consider a person of a different religion as simply having different colour eyes?

I care about the destroyed buildings, I am sorry for the displaced people, but what I cannot forgive the warlords for is the dead men, women and children.

Anything is replaceable except life, and those who lost their lives are many in my country today, 200 thousand.

I want to bring those 200 thousand who were killed in Syria to London, to Europe, I want you to see them, look at their eyes and feel their loss, but I will not leave them dead, I want to bring them to life, I want them to tell their stories, to defend their differences, to convince everybody that they deserved to live.

These paintings are about a civil war, it is not a Syrian civil war anymore, it is becoming a "World Civil War", and those dead-reborn fellows of the paintings, increasing daily, are shouting: "it is enough".